



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Salmon Conservation: DCAL Briefing

2 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Aidan Cassidy	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Seamus Connor	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr David Mann	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

The Chairperson: We welcome Mr Aidan Cassidy, the head of policy and administration at inland fisheries in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); Mr Seamus Connor, the deputy chief fisheries officer; and Mr David Mann, a Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure official in inland fisheries. Gentlemen, you are very welcome this morning. If you would like to make an opening statement, we can follow that up with some questions.

Mr Aidan Cassidy (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, for giving officials from the inland fisheries group the opportunity to brief the Committee on the statistical analysis of responses to the recent public consultation on options for salmon conservation measures. By way of introduction, I am Aidan Cassidy, and I have recently taken over as head of policy and administration in inland fisheries. I am joined this morning by my colleagues Seamus Connor, the deputy chief fisheries officer, and David Mann, my deputy on the policy side from DCAL.

We are obviously aware that the Committee has taken a close interest in the range of issues that have impacted on the conservation and protection of wild Atlantic salmon stocks over the past year. It is now widely acknowledged that stocks of wild Atlantic salmon are in serious decline, including some in North America and Europe that are threatened with extinction. In October 2011, at the salmon summit in La Rochelle, France, international scientists confirmed that wild salmon are dying at sea in alarming numbers. The long-term monitoring at our salmon station at Bushmills of the survival of salmon during the marine phase of their life cycle shows a decline from around 30% returning from the sea prior to 1997 to less than 5% today. In light of that, our Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, made an announcement in January 2012 calling for a range of voluntary salmon conservation measures to be implemented throughout the DCAL jurisdiction by commercial fishermen and recreational anglers for the 2012

season. That has been widely supported, and it will help to minimise further exploitation of stocks while the Department consults with stakeholders and the public at large on further salmon conservation measures, and, of course, with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The consultation period opened on 1 May 2012 and closed on 10 July 2012, and it invited views on a series of options for salmon conservation measures for commercial fishing and recreational angling.

Madam Chair, with your agreement, I will now pass over to David, who has led in the design and delivery of the consultation process. He will take the Committee through the detail of the analysis of responses.

Mr David Mann (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The public consultation was carried out online via the SurveyMonkey website. We had the assistance of the Department's research and statistics branch in designing it. We also put in place arrangements to provide hard copies of the consultation for those who did not have access to a computer. The consultation attracted a total of 371 valid responses, 34 of which were submitted in hard copy. Individuals' views accounted for 91% of responses, while the remaining 9% were from a range of organisations, such as angling clubs, representing the views of almost 17,000 people. Some 85% of respondents indicated that they were recreational anglers, and almost three quarters of respondents stated that they actively fished for salmon. Only 2% of respondents indicated an involvement with commercial fishing. Of all respondents, 96% were male, with the remaining 4% of responses broadly reflective of the level of female participation in angling.

Moving on to the options for conservation measures, there was strong support among respondents for the total cessation of commercial salmon fishing, with 83% expressing that view. Of the six respondents who indicated that they were involved in commercial salmon fishing, three supported the total cessation option, two preferred the quota regulation option, and one supported the do-nothing option. That indicates that, among a significant proportion of commercial salmon fishermen, there is an acknowledgment that the best option for the conservation and protection of wild Atlantic salmon is the cessation of commercial exploitation. A total of almost three quarters of respondents indicated a preference for mandatory catch and release in recreational angling. That proportion was made up of 43% of respondents supporting mandatory catch and release only and 31% preferring mandatory catch and release together with temporal restrictions and quota regulation. Only 7% of respondents were in favour of a total cessation of recreational angling for salmon.

The analysis of the preferred options shows that a significant majority support total cessation of commercial salmon fishing and mandatory catch and release for recreational angling. That will be factored in to the advice to be provided to the Minister.

The consultation also asked for views on three other proposed amendments to legislation that would support the Department in its responsibility to conserve salmon stocks. Those proposals were to amend fish dealers' registers to make them include details of farmed and wild salmon, a ban on rod-caught salmon and the creation of an offence of possession of forged or altered salmon carcass tags. Each amendment attracted almost total support, with agreement rates of 92%, 98% and 96% respectively.

We are now happy to take members' questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you. How was the consultation document promoted among the relevant stakeholders?

Mr Mann: We notified angling clubs and issued press releases, and so on, to publicise the availability of the survey.

The Chairperson: Was there any verification throughout the process of whether respondents had a recreational or commercial interest?

Mr Mann: We set the survey up in such a way that meant that respondents had to complete certain fields to complete the survey. If they did not, their response would not be recorded. However, who people said they were was taken very much at face value.

The Chairperson: You said that how respondents progressed through the various fields depended on how they answered the questions. Was there no opportunity for anyone to qualify their answers by saying, "Yes, but —" or "No, but —"?

Mr Mann: Yes, there was an opportunity for the respondents to comment on their choice of options, and we will publish those comments at a later date.

The Chairperson: Obviously, we heard from the Department earlier this year about the very strong debate between netmen and rod anglers and about the issues with EC law. Will you update the Committee on any recent communication that you have had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on the potential breach of the EC habitats directive?

Mr Mann: There has not been any further contact from DEFRA regarding the information that was put forward to the EU. So, there is no indication that the EU is taking any further action.

The Chairperson: As Aidan indicated in his opening comments, the Department implemented short-term conservation measures earlier this year. What response was there to those? Although it is probably still too early to gauge the effect on stock, have you seen any benefits?

Mr Cassidy: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am conscious that I am in this post just a matter of weeks. However, from the meetings and discussions that I have had with a broad range of interests, I think that it has been very satisfying to learn that anglers have taken up voluntary catch and release very well. That was certainly borne out at the meeting that we had with the Salmon Inland Fisheries Forum (SIFF) last week. So, anglers have given an excellent response to voluntary catch and release. I think that they are recognising that with rights come responsibilities, and that has certainly come through very clearly.

David, do you want to mention the netmen?

Mr Mann: We had discussions with the netmen earlier in the year. They agreed voluntarily not to fish. They gave us a written undertaking that they would not fish, and they have not. Two of the netmen did not give us that undertaking. They were not issued with licences and, therefore, they cannot fish and have not fished. They are the subject of court proceedings, and they have now appealed the Department's decision.

The Chairperson: In many respects, you could say that commercial fishermen have made the ultimate sacrifice in so much as they have stopped fishing altogether. What monitoring is there of recreational rodmen's compliance with catch and release?

Mr Cassidy: Seamus can maybe pick up on that point.

The Chairperson: I understand that it is voluntary.

Mr Cassidy: Seamus, do you want to speak about this from the operational side?

Mr Seamus Connor (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): We have been monitoring the sites that commercial fishermen would have fished previously. We have also been carrying out boat patrols to ensure that there has been no fishing, and many of our patrols have confirmed that that is the case.

The recreational element is clearly voluntary for fishermen who are not fishing in DCAL waters. We have it made a condition of somebody's buying a permit that all fish that are caught should be released back. For those who do not fish in DCAL waters, the law still applies, and it is very much a voluntary action. As Aidan indicated, the information that we have from those angling clubs is that the fishermen have been very proactive and must be commended for the stance that they have taken. The vast majority have complied with voluntary catch and release and have put salmon back when they have caught them.

The Chairperson: Do you have any details of the number of times the patrols have been out in DCAL waters, particularly in and around the Ballycastle area?

Mr Connor: I cannot give those figures off the top of my head, but we can certainly provide the Committee with them.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thank you for that. I declare an interest at the outset by saying that I am a member of a number of angling associations, not necessarily in DCAL waters, but, nonetheless, related. I note with interest that 97% of recreational anglers agree to a total cessation of restrictions and regulation. That is encouraging, and it is very reflective of anglers' real feeling that they have been proactive on this issue for a number of years.

I know that in some rivers anglers have been catching and releasing for 10 or 12 years now. Those figures are encouraging. Has the Loughs Agency done any research for the remaining rivers, particularly those for here, as well as those on the Southern side? The case of mixed-bag fish was the reason why we looked at the habitats directive for net-caught salmon. Do you have any information from other rivers about catch and release?

Mr Connor: You are right in what you say. Most anglers have been at this practice for years. It has been confirmed and further reinforced this year that they have continued with catch and release, but we do not have details from the Loughs Agency per se.

Mr Ó hOisín: As a fisherman, I know that the practicalities are that, in real terms, the only fish that you can catch and release relatively safely are fly-caught fish. Will any restrictions be put on spinning and worm fishing?

Mr Connor: We have a rod fishery at the River Bush salmon station, and we are looking at marking fish that have been caught. Interestingly enough, two recent captures have been from people who were spinning, and those fish have turned up in the trap. We catch all the fish that come through there, and we are monitoring the survival of those fish because there are some variances in the number of fish that actually survive. Therefore, we are starting to record that information, the method by which the fish were caught and how well they do. We have a number of tanks set up to observe those fish for a period of time.

Mr Ó hOisín: Is something being done for bait-caught fish?

Mr Connor: We note the method that was used to catch them, and our staff panjet the fish at the station. Those fish are released back to the river again, and, as they make their way up, we are able to identify them in the trap.

Mr Ó hOisín: Does that not surely mean that a very small percentage of fish are coming through the entire systems, given the fall in numbers?

Mr Connor: It would, but it depends on the catch.

Mr Cassidy: Mr Ó hOisín made a very valuable point about looking at the lessons, particularly in the Loughs Agency. I have arranged a meeting with the agency, and we will pick up on that point and factor it in to the advice that we are putting to the Minister for her consideration of our future policy.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning. I noticed in your presentation and in the consultation summary that there has been a decline in the numbers of fish that are returning from the sea. The numbers have reduced from 30% in 1997 to 5% this year. Does that indicate that the problem is further out in the ocean? Some of your colleagues confirmed in previous discussions that that was due to climate change, the warming of Atlantic waters, and so on. So, what real impact can the measures that you intend to take have on those numbers? Or, is the problem, in fact, out of your control?

Mr Connor: I think that you are right in saying that the main issue seems to be survival at sea. I will put it in very simple terms: about 15 years ago, for every 100 smolts that left the river, about 30 adults came back. That dropped to as low as three last year, which is actually less than 5% of what left. So, something is happening there that means that grilts, in particular, are not surviving as well. It is a different story for older fish; they seem to be coping reasonably well. They may be feeding somewhere differently.

As for the measures that we can take, we can only look to the freshwater cycle and look to improve air, habitat and water quality in conjunction with the Environment Agency, as well as to maximise the smolt production. From the recent scientific meeting, the bottom line is that we need to increase the number of smolts that we are sending out to sea to circumvent the decline that is happening there.

Mr D Bradley: Is there not some sort of a north Atlantic salmon propagation organisation? Are you working in conjunction with it?

Mr Connor: Yes. We are signatories, so we are bound by its guidelines, and we have statutory requirements to meet under it. That organisation is looking to the same issue, and its advice is to improve habitat, increase the number of smolts and manage the stock better than previously. So, we are following its guidelines and advice, and we have to report to it every year as well. We have to put forward plans, and it reviews those plans and indicates whether they are satisfactory. So, a process is in place.

Mr D Bradley: What sort of measures are being taken out to sea?

Mr Connor: Given that the sea is fairly complex, there is still a bit of research to be done. We are trying to identify factors that are impacting on where the salmon smolts are feeding. It is only when that information becomes available that we will be able to do something about it.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. May I declare my total ignorance of fishing? I need to say at the outset that this is new to me, so forgive me if my questions sound a bit naive or stupid.

I want to ask a couple of things. What is the difference between netsmen and anglers? According to the consultation, the total cessation figures and percentages are very high compared with the low figure of the recreational anglers. Why is that? Is the salmon industry in the South of Ireland in the same situation? How are they dealing with the issue? Is there a joined-up approach?

Mr Cassidy: I will pick up questions one and three, and Seamus can pick up the second question. You asked about netsmen and anglers. Netsmen are licensed for the commercial exploitation of salmon and other fish species. Anglers, generally, are individuals who fish for recreational purposes.

You also asked about the position in Ireland. The decline in the salmon stocks is an international problem, as Seamus referred to. Our colleagues in the South of Ireland are facing exactly the same difficulties.

Mr Connor: What was the second question?

Ms McCorley: I was wondering what you felt was the reason for the difference in the response to the question of the total cessation. There is a very high percentage in the commercial side and a very low percentage in the recreational.

Mr Mann: I think that there was a significant groundswell of opinion that the commercial exploitation of salmon was having a significant effect. There is a view, which is widely held throughout the angling community, that that would have to stop.

Where recreational angling is concerned, there were a lot of comments on the fact that, if we closed rivers to salmon fishing and the fishermen were no longer there, poachers could come in and illegally net in rivers, and so on. If fishing were still allowed, there would be a presence on the river that would help to deter poachers acting illegally.

Mr Swann: Thank you for your presentation, gentlemen. What are the steps now? What is your timeline for legislation interaction?

Mr Cassidy: The position now is that we have advised the Minister that we will bring forward policy options that are based on the views that were expressed in the consultation process and by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and other stakeholder interests. We will present those proposals to her, hopefully by the end of October. The next stage in the process is, obviously, for the Minister to decide which way she wishes to take that forward. Clearly, she will want to take forward a range of options to address the current difficulties. It is likely that that will require legislation. Obviously, that would be taken forward in close consultation with, and with the input of, the Committee and other stakeholder interests. That timescale gives us a challenging deadline, to say the least. However, as the Minister indicated recently, she is minded to try to get legislation in place by 2013. I will add that that is an extremely tight timescale, bearing in mind that we have to consult the Committee at each stage of the process, engage with the Departmental Solicitor's Office and,

importantly, liaise and discuss with the various stakeholders so that we get legislation in place that addresses the challenges.

Mr Swann: If you do not get that legislation in place, what is your plan B for next year?

Mr Cassidy: We will put that option to the Minister, and it will be for her to decide what action we would take.

Mr Swann: Would that be similar to this year's voluntary conservation measures?

Mr Cassidy: I would not want to speculate about what the Minister would suggest or do, but it is reasonable to assume that there would be similar measures.

Mr Swann: You mentioned the commercial men and that court proceedings are under way. Will it hamper or affect us in bringing forward legislation, if any is in place?

Mr Cassidy: The Department is considering that issue. We will be taking that forward in consultation with the Minister, but we do not see that as an obstacle.

Mr Swann: So, you do not think that it will be an obstacle. Is there the potential for judicial review, if legislation were to come forward for 2013?

Mr Cassidy: I suppose there is always the potential for judicial review, but we hope that that will not be necessary.

Mr Swann: You mentioned your involvement with SIFF. Where is it, as a collective body, on what you are presenting to us?

Mr Cassidy: SIFF offered very useful and comprehensive comments on the consultation exercise. We met SIFF again last week, and we had a very open and constructive discussion on all the issues. As I understand it — David will keep me right — SIFF now has the opportunity to consider the Minister's decision on what action she wishes to take forward, whether that is a legislative process or whatever. As I understand it, now that SIFF has made the Department aware of its position, it is content to comment at that stage of the process.

Mr Swann: I have just one last question. Do you have any indication, anecdotally, of whether this year's runs are up or down?

Mr Connor: They are pretty much similar and in line with previous years, to be perfectly honest with you, Robin; certainly in the Bush that would be the case. Other rivers are seeing more fish about, such as on the Blackwater up through Lough Neagh, upper Bann, Moyola and the Clady river. There is anecdotal evidence that there are more fish about in some of the rivers.

Mr McMullan: I know that the Department said that almost all respondents agreed to the proposal to ban the sale of rod-caught salmon. How can we go further and look at a ban for those who buy those fish? That is one of the big problems that induces some anger. Anglers can subsidise their day's or year's angling by selling those fish. How can we go further and make that more robust?

Mr Cassidy: Mr McMullan, that is a very fair point. That came out in the consultation process and will be a major part of the advice that we will put to the Minister. That issue clearly needs to be addressed.

Mr McMullan: Would it have anything to do with the number of tags that are issued? Have we looked at the number of tags that are issued to individual anglers?

Mr Cassidy: That is also an issue. Two tags were issued, and we took views from a wide range of people about that. We will factor in that advice for the Minister to consider.

Mr McMullan: Was the Tourist Board asked to participate in the consultation?

Mr Mann: It would have been aware that the consultation was under way. I do not believe that there was a response to it from the Tourist Board.

Mr McMullan: Was it asked to respond? Did it receive a consultation paper?

Mr Mann: It would have been notified that the consultation was under way. We wrote to a wide range of stakeholders at the beginning of the consultation to let them know about it. The Tourist Board would have been on that consultation list.

Mr McMullan: Did it not respond?

Mr Mann: No.

Mr Connor: On the issue of rod-caught fish, the current legislation states that the person who buys fish must ensure that those fish are legally caught. If they are not legally caught, we can take action against the person who sells them, and potentially the person who buys them as well. That is how the legislation sits at the moment. If a ban on rod-caught salmon were to come into place, it would improve the situation.

Mr McMullan: Would it require a change to the legislation?

Mr Connor: Under the current legislation, there is a requirement for any fish that is bought — particularly salmon, trout and eels — to be caught legally, by licence or by some other method.

Mr McMullan: When this comes in, do you envisage that it will include private waters? At present, there is no way of finding out who owns what, where or anything else. Did the consultation cover that?

Mr Connor: It should do.

Mr Mann: Whatever comes out of the consultation and whatever decision the Minister takes on what action will be taken will cover not just the DCAL fishery but all fisheries in the DCAL jurisdiction.

Mr McMullan: Would that also cover those in private ownership?

Mr Connor: It does not matter; they would all be covered.

Mr McMullan: Would it be blanket legislation that covers all?

Mr Cassidy: Yes, across the DCAL jurisdiction.

Mr McMullan: What is outside of the DCAL jurisdiction?

Mr Connor: The Loughs Agency area, which covers Lough Foyle and Carlingford lough. Everything aside from that would be covered by the legislation.

Mr McMullan: All rivers?

Mr Connor: All rivers would be covered, regardless of who owns them.

Mr McMullan: Tributaries and the works?

Mr Connor: The whole lot.

Mr McMullan: Would the owners of those private waters then be asked to register? I do not think that there is a register at present. We need a full register of ownership so that we can see where the fish are going, and so on. Will a register of ownership and responsibility be produced? Those who own private waters are charging money for fishing that we do not really know about. That needs to be addressed, and I think that that was part of what we said before the consultation took place. Will that be addressed?

Mr Cassidy: If that point was not picked up in earlier discussions, we will certainly pick it up now.

Mr McMullan: Can we get some guarantee that that will happen? There are rivers that are not on the radar, and that is not fair on those anglers who are working with their angling clubs. All rivers need to be on the radar.

Mr Cassidy: Mr McMullan, a point was made earlier about the input from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Tourist Board has not responded to the consultation, but, as part of the next stage of the process, we will run past the Tourist Board the outcome of the consultation and what the Minister proposes to do. The issue of maximising value, particularly of DCAL public angling, is very important to recreational tourism and the impact that that can have on the economy. Therefore, the Tourist Board's view is important.

Mrs McKeivitt: It is good to see you again, Aidan. Mr Swann made a lot of the points that I was going to make, and thank you for your replies to him. Mr Bradley asked about the North Atlantic Wild Sea Salmon Fishermen's Association, and you said that you were in consultation with that body. I notice from the consultation that only four responded from the association. Have you been dealing only with small numbers from the association?

Mr Connor: It is an international organisation, so we do not expect it to comment on particularly local issues such as this. It will review our plans, in that it will ask us what we will do to address the situation with salmon in the Northern Ireland context. We will give it plans on habitat improvement, stock restoration and conservation and protection methods. The association will review those plans, but we do not necessarily expect it to get involved in this single consultation exercise. It was open to it to comment on, as it was open to anyone else.

Mrs McKeivitt: A good point was made about the lack of a response from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to the consultation. Carlingford lough is monitored by the Loughs Agency, and there is tourist potential around it, particularly in Kilkeel, where people make a living from fishing, and so on. I would appreciate it if you were able to discuss the south Down and Carlingford lough area in your talks.

Mr McGimpsey: Obviously, we cannot solve this issue on our own, bearing in mind the environment in the Atlantic. There are certain things that we can do, such as habitat, catch and release, a commercial net ban and the policing of illegal nets, and your consultation covers those.

You say that the returns are down from 30% to 5% in the past 20 years. What sorts of numbers does that represent? As I recall, there was always a diminishing number in the run of salmon, and we used to augment it with farmed salmon and released salmon. I do not know whether you still do that.

Mr Connor: On the River Bush, for example, we will electrofish during the summer. We will have a look at all the sites that we normally use, and, where fly numbers are down, we will supplement those with the Bush stock in an effort to improve and increase the wild run.

We have managed to increase the salmon smolt wild run. It is probably sitting at around 25,000, certainly for last year. As you rightly point out, the freshwater environment is probably the one singular element that we can influence by improving habitat and stocking. We have seen an increase in smolts. The returns back to river have been sitting at around 1,000 fish to 1,700 fish, and the figure goes up and down from year to year, as you would expect. It has been fairly constant at that level over the past number of years.

Mr McGimpsey: If you are running at around 1,000 to 1,500, how many of those are your own hatched salmon, as opposed to wild salmon?

Mr Connor: Probably around 500 adults from that will be of hatched origin.

Mr McGimpsey: Nearly half are non-wild.

Mr Connor: It depends on the year, but, yes, it could be as many as half.

Mr McGimpsey: You take those out of the run. Is that right?

Mr Connor: Those are taken out of the run.

Mr McGimpsey: Another big issue is that of cormorants. You hugely augmented the population of cormorants by this policy. Have you made any progress on controlling their numbers around rivers? I remember that a cormorant would take 10 or 12 smolts that you released in one feed. That was happening up and down the rivers, and as cormorants were protected, no one could touch them.

Mr Connor: It is still fairly —

Mr McGimpsey: Predation was massive, but —

Mr Connor: Predation varies from year to year, but cormorants are still protected. Fish owners have the right to protect the fish stocks in their river, and we apply every year for a licence to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to cull some of the cormorants. They are very widespread throughout the whole Province, and you now seem to get them further and further inland. At the time at which smolts are running, that is the most obvious thing that they will look for. They predate other fish species, such as coarse fish stocks, as well.

Mr McGimpsey: It sets it in context. You are talking about 1,000 to 1,500 returns, of which around half are wild salmon. The other half are hatched salmon. It is the wild salmon that we are interested in. It gives you an indication of just how precarious the population is when we are down to 750 returns a year. That is in danger of extinction territory. If you are looking at them in their genetic strains, they could be Bush salmon or Faughan salmon.

Ballyshannon was always a very famous salmon river, and then the Ballyshannon hydroelectric power station was built, and that stopped all salmon flow. The Irish Government assured us several years ago that they were going to fix that. Did they ever do so?

Mr Connor: My understanding is that they have not fixed it. We are involved with the Electricity Supply Board and the Northern Regional Fisheries Board, and we stock parts of the Erne with Erne salmon. My understanding is that the recent numbers have been reasonably good; Ballyshannon has seen a slight increase in the number of salmon coming up through it owing to the various things that we have in place.

Mr McGimpsey: That is good to see, because they dive over the hydro, which kills most of them.

Mr Connor: The smolts on the way down is the problem, when they go through the turbines. When the adults come back up again, they have to come up a series of steps to get back into the Erne again.

Mr Ó hOisín: The Loughs Agency did not respond to the consultation. Was it asked to be a consultee? The Campaign for the Protection of Welsh Fisheries and the Wye Salmon Association replied.

Mr Cassidy: It is not for us to comment on Loughs Agency policy, but we understand that it would not normally comment on such a paper.

Mr Ó hOisín: Was it asked?

Mr Mann: It would have been aware that consultation was under way, but it was not specifically asked to comment. There will be an opportunity further down the line: when we are looking at the draft consultation, we will consult with it at that point.

Mr Cassidy: We will pick up that point also when we meet with it shortly.

Mr Ó hOisín: I noticed a recent report in which there was some speculation, or, indeed, scientific evidence, of seagoing salmon smolts being lost to the mackerel fisheries off the coasts. Some of it is actually going for fish meal. I do not know whether there is any further information on that.

Mr Connor: I do not know whether anything further has come from that. We used to think that salmon travelled only on the surface. Acoustic tags and things like that have shown that some fish dive up to

900 metres, so there is a concern that separate fisheries would pick them up. I am not sure that there is any further evidence to back up that assumption.

The Chairperson: We are doing the rounds again, I am afraid.

Mr Swann: To pick up on what Mr Ó hOisín said, the legislation that DCAL brings forward will not have to be implemented in the Loughs Agency's areas. Is that correct?

Mr Mann: The outcome of the consultation and the legislation that we bring forward will be for the DCAL jurisdiction, but there are ongoing discussions with the Loughs Agency about harmonising the policies.

Mr Swann: If we were to get legislation in place before your policies are harmonised, would we be looking at another piece of work to replicate the same legislation in Loughs Agency waters?

Mr Mann: That would be up to the Loughs Agency to implement.

Mr McMullan: Is there anything to protect the rivers from farm salmon that escape? In the past, quite a number have escaped. Can we do anything about that?

Mr Connor: We monitor farm escapees that go back to the Bush, for example. We keep a record of any farm fish that turn up. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has responsibility for fish farms, and my understanding is that it has various plans in place to, if we get a breakout such as that at Glenarm, take action to remove those fish from the system so that there is no possibility of interbreeding.

Mr McMullan: They are taken out of the system?

Mr Connor: The intention is to take them out of the system, yes.

The Chairperson: You continue to have discussions with SIFF. Does SIFF represent commercial and recreational fishermen?

Mr Cassidy: Yes. My understanding is that it does.

Mr Mann: Yes, there has been some turnover in the members of SIFF. A number of commercial netsmen resigned, but we now have a replacement for one of them. There is a commercial salmon netsman on SIFF again.

The Chairperson: You are likely to bring forward legislation or measures shortly. Will a target be put in place so that fishing may return once the stocks are at a particular level? Will this be temporary measure?

Mr Cassidy: I understand the point. The issue has come up quite regularly in discussions, particularly questions about the terminology "cessation" and whether that is a permanent cessation or for an indefinite period. Our reading of it is that our objective is to work on a fishery management strategy to bring us back to a point at which we can resume normal fishing, whether that be normal angling or normal commercial fishing.

The Chairperson: So it is temporary?

Mr Cassidy: That is for the Minister to define. We have been asked to clarify that, and we will put advice to the Minister on that. It will be defined when she comes up with her proposals.

The Chairperson: The issue needs to be clarified, particularly given some of the responses from commercial fishermen. When you are talking about total cessation, is there a caveat, such as you are content to stop until levels reach a target at which people can go out again and resume their livelihoods?

Mr Cassidy: We will pick that issue up, and the Minister will make clear what she means by "cessation".

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much. We will hear from you again on 18 October.